



Information Brief

Intensive Interventions

As schools commit to educating all students and fostering their healthy development, one area that requires attention is that of intensive, targeted interventions for those with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties. The problems presented to school personnel by students who exhibit behaviors that differ greatly from other students, disrupt the learning environment, and challenge the training and skills of educators have caused some to question the role of schools in students' lives. Although schools may provide an array of services to address the needs of troubled students, current studies support as effective the development of systems of care, of which school is one very important partner with families and community-based services.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *The school, in collaboration with the community, provides a full and accessible array of specialized programs and services to address the needs of students experiencing social, emotional and/or behavioral problems.*
- *Schools and community agencies and organizations establish working partnerships to support students and their families.*
- *A community-based comprehensive system of integrated services is linked with schools in the district.*

INTRODUCTION

In every school, there is a population of students who experience moderate to severe emotional and behavioral problems that significantly interfere with their daily functioning and quality of life across multiple domains – school, family, peers, and community. Experts estimate these students make up from three to ten percent of the total student population. If schools are to provide adequately for these students' complex needs, they must first believe they have a responsibility to provide necessary services.

Those who question that premise state that such activity

"It is not a new insight that mental health and psychosocial problems must be addressed if schools are to function satisfactorily and if students are to learn and perform effectively."

*-Howard Adelman and
Linda Taylor,
UCLA, 1999*

will take time away from the educational mission of schools, or that schools working in this arena infringe on the rights and values of families. Still others question the unsystematic and fragmented way that programs and services are carried out (Adelman and Taylor, 1999). School personnel may feel they lack the skills needed to deal with the students' challenging behaviors and the resources required to provide appropriate services. To be effective in dealing with mental health and behavioral concerns, schools must join families and communities to provide comprehensive, multi-faceted, and integrated services as part of their school improvement efforts.

THE PROBLEM

A report entitled *National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional*

Disturbance (1994), prepared for the U.S. Department of Education by the Chesapeake Institute, pointed out the critical importance of improving services to students with mental health and behavioral needs. If Iowa's population of students with serious emotional and behavioral problems follows the national trends cited in the report, some of which are restated below, then the results could alert us to the potential impact of the problem on our state's indicators of student success in school and in our communities.

"Education plays a critical role in the development of children. Positive learning experiences help to prevent emotional and behavioral problems. Furthermore, schools provide a logical setting for both early identification for children at risk for serious emotional disturbance and for effective delivery of services.....Despite this acknowledged importance a 1992 study found schools to be only marginally involved in systems of care."

- Promising Practices in Children's Mental Health, 1998

Iowa Indicators of Student Success in School

Iowa Code (§256.11) and Iowa Administrative Code (§281, Chapter 12) require schools in Iowa to work toward meeting a set of state indicators. To what extent does the population of troubled youngsters influence the results? Although specific data are not available for the state, national data may inform the work of schools that strive to close the gaps between current and desired levels of performance (*National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance*, 1994):

- **Academic Outcomes:** Students with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties get lower grades than any other group of students. They have records of more frequent course failure and lower performance on competency tests than do other students with disabilities.
- **Graduation Rates:** The percentage of students with serious emotional and behavioral problems who earn high school diplomas is about 34 percent less than the rate for similarly aged youth in the general population.
- **Dropout Rates:** In grades 9-12, twice as many students with serious emotional and behavioral problems drop out of school compared to all high school students.

Impact on the Community

- **Involvement with the Juvenile Justice System:** Authorities arrest one out of five students with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties before they leave school compared to one in nearly 17 in the general student population. They will arrest 58 percent of all students with serious emotional and behavioral problems within five years of leaving school. For dropouts, the percentage rises to 73 percent.

Students with serious emotional and behavioral problems are more likely than students with other disabilities to be placed in restrictive settings. Placements made out of neighborhood schools and communities are very costly to communities and disruptive to families. They impede many students from developing the academic and social competencies they will need for their entire lives.

These figures probably tell us what we already suspected. Nevertheless, they do call our attention to the potential loss of future workers and contributing citizens, as well as the sizeable investment of dollars and resources that result from a failure to habilitate these young people by providing them with effective programs and services.

"Improving outcomes for children with serious emotional disturbance depends not only on improving their school and learning opportunities, but also on promoting effective collaboration across other critical areas of support: families, social services, health, mental health, and juvenile justice."

- Woodruff, et al, (1998)

THE SOLUTION

The National Agenda

The National Agenda for Achieving Better Results for Children and Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance (1994) developed by the Chesapeake Institute for the U.S. Department of Education, Office

of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Office of Special Education Programs set forth seven targets for improved services to students with serious emotional disturbance:

The Seven Targets of the National Agenda

1. *To foster the provision of engaging, useful, and positive learning opportunities.*
 - Provide culturally responsive, student-centered opportunities to learn that are characterized by high expectations and tailored to meet individual needs.
 - Support coordinated initiatives that improve the effectiveness of teachers, families, schools, and other agencies and contribute to the whole development of students with serious emotional and behavioral difficulties and those at risk for these problems.
2. *To foster initiatives that strengthen the capacities of schools and communities to serve students with serious emotional and behavioral disabilities in the least restrictive environments appropriate.*
 - Develop the capacity to integrate students with challenging behaviors into neighborhood schools and regular classrooms.
 - Provide early intervention, prevention, and pre-referral activities, such as problem solving teams.
3. *To value and address diversity.*
 - Undertake approaches that improve the capacity of individuals and systems to respond skillfully, respectfully, and effectively to students, their families, teachers, and providers in a manner that recognizes and affirms their dignity and worth.
 - Support culturally competent approaches.
4. *To collaborate with families to provide family-focused services that will improve educational outcomes.*
 - Ensure that services are open, helpful, culturally competent, accessible to families and school, as well as community-based.
 - Implement service planning that reflects the input of families' goals, knowledge, cultures, and need for additional services.
5. *To promote appropriate assessments for the identification, design, and delivery of services for students with emotional and behavioral problems.*
 - Provide assessments that are culturally competent, ethical, and functional.
 - Ensure that ongoing, continuous assessment captures the student's changing developmental needs.
6. *To provide ongoing skill development and support.*
 - Provide ongoing support and professional development of teachers and other service providers.
 - Hold field-based training that promotes collaboration among families, teachers, paraprofessionals, and mental health professionals.

7. *To create comprehensive and collaborative systems.*

- Promote systems change that will result in coherent services built around the individual needs of students with or at risk of developing serious emotional and behavioral disabilities.
- Provide family-centered, community-, school-based, and appropriately funded services.
- Create systems that are outcome oriented, employ uniform definitions, provide individualized and family-centered services, and respond effectively, promptly, and flexibly during any crisis.

The Role of Schools

Schools may take multiple approaches to addressing the intensive needs of students with moderate to severe emotional and behavior problems. Among these are special education services, alternative educational programs, school-based mental health services, and systems of care. These services should be individualized to meet the needs of students and their families and provided in the least restrictive environment appropriate.

Special education: Not all students with moderate to severe emotional and behavioral problems are eligible to receive special education services. For those who are, the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) affirmed the intent that special education be an array of services and supports delivered to a student rather than a place to take a student. Use separate classes and facilities only when the goals for the students cannot be achieved or the needed services and supports cannot be delivered effectively in the regular educational environment. A system of positive behavioral interventions and supports can successfully address the special needs of students with emotional and behavioral concerns in a variety of settings, including the regular education classroom.

Alternative educational programs: Following suspension, expulsion or students dropping out, some school districts provide for the continuation of their

education through alternative educational programs (Iowa Code §280.21B), either in the student's home, school or a separate setting. Some programs have a behavioral focus while others may include day treatment.

School-based mental health services: Iowa school districts, with access to the services of community agencies, have adopted a comprehensive school health or school-based youth services model. These models co-locate an array of community services in the school. Successful programs are an integral part of a school's improvement plans and weave mental health principles and practices throughout daily life in the school.

Systems of care: The Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) defines a system of care as an integrated continuum of mental health and related services and supports designed to ensure that children and youth with serious emotional and behavioral problems and their families get the right service at the right time as close to their homes as possible. The design and delivery of services in a system of care optimally begins with the students who are exhibiting problems and their families. Individuals who represent the services that can best address the needs of the students and their families form a team. The team develops, implements, and continuously monitors a plan that has the active involvement of the family and is built on its strengths.

SUMMARY

It is possible to improve outcomes for children and youth with serious emotional and behavioral problems. Part of the answer lies in the beliefs that schools have a role to play in addressing the needs of these students and that they are worth the investment. Another part of the answer is in the availability of resources – time, trained personnel, and finance – needed to provide the services. And finally, a part of the answer lies in one's vision and commitment to develop and implement the services required.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
 - Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice: <http://cecp.air.org/>
 - School Mental Health Project/Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>
 - *Success4*, Iowa Department of Education: <http://www.state.ia.us/educate/programs/success4/index.html>
- **In this Handbook:** See “*Success4* Critical Elements,” *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe School*, Chapter 4; *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, Chapter 4; and *A Continuum of Programs and Services, Comprehensive Programming, Positive Behavioral Supports, and Wraparound Services* in this section of Information Briefs.